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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001555

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/27/15
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: Presidential Hopefuls Begin Signature Collection
Campaign

Ref: A) Minsk 1535 B) Minsk 1227

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Constance Phlipot for Reasons
1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Central Electoral Committee (CEC) on December 27 registered all eight candidates for the March presidential elections and their "groups of support." The potential candidates include President Lukashenko, pro-Lukashenko MP Sergey Gaidukevich, 10+ coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, former MP General Valery Frolov, former Speaker of Parliament Aleksandr Voitovich, former Belarusian State University Rector Aleksandr Kozulin, former MP Sergey Skrebetz, and even self-exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party-Belarusian Popular Front Zenyon Poznyak. CEC officials have told Poloffs the registration of the potential candidates was merely a procedural matter. The final and most difficult step to contesting the presidential elections lays ahead Q collection of 100,000 signatures from voters between December 29 and January 27. As in 2001, the number of candidates who collect the necessary signatures, or who make it through the CEC's arbitrary screening of voter signatures, will likely be significantly reduced. End Summary.

Hopefuls Clear the First HurdleQ

¶2. (SBU) According to the electoral calendar established by the Central Electoral Committee (CEC), potential candidates needed to submit their names and the members of their "groups of support" by December 23 (ref A). The CEC had until December 27 to determine the identity and legal status of the potential candidates and their support groups. The CEC registered all eight potential candidates and their support groups:

-- President Lukashenko. His support group includes 6,212 people, which figured as the largest registered support group. Head of the Presidential Administration Victor Sheyman will serve as Lukashenko's campaign manager. (Note: According to the CEC Chairwoman Lydia Yermoshina, Sheyman resigned as PA Head on December 28. She explained that according to Belarusian law, Sheyman had to submit his resignation to serve as Lukashenko's campaign manager. However, neither Sheyman nor the PA has acknowledged any resignation. Press reports suggest Lukashenko would name Sheyman as Prime Minister following the elections.)

-- Aleksandr Milinkevich. Milinkevich is the candidate from the 10+ coalition, which is the largest grouping of democratic political parties and NGOs. Milinkevich's support group includes 5,136 people, which is the second largest support group. Ten Plus coalition leader and chairman of the deregistered Labor Party Aleksandr Buchvostov will serve as support group coordinator. (Note: Buchvostov will continue to report to 10+ campaign manager Sergey Kalyakin.)

-- Aleksandr Kozulin. Kozulin is leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party Gramada (BSDP), Belarus' largest social-democratic party, and former rector of Belarusian State University. His initiative group includes 3,345 people. BSDP Deputy Myechislav Grib will serve as Kozulin's campaign manager.

-- Sergey Gaidukevich. MP Gaidukevich is chairman of the pro-Lukashenko Liberal Democratic Party. His support group includes 3,073 people. Deputy LDP chairman Vladimir Karunas will serve as Gaidukevich's campaign manager.

-- Zenyon Poznyak. Poznyak is leader of the Conservative Christian Party Belarusian Popular Front (CCP) and founder and former leader of the separate Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). His initiative group includes 2,405 people, and CCP Deputy Sergey Popkov will serve as his campaign manager.

-- Aleksandr Voitovich. Voitovich is a former Speaker of Parliament and an academic. His support group includes 1,314 volunteers, and European Humanities University Deputy Rector Valery Dunaev will serve as his campaign manager. (Comment: Dunaev spends much of his time in Vilnius since EHU was forced to relocate to the neighboring country when the GOB closed it in 2004.)

-- Valery Frolov. General Frolov is a former MP and current member of the BSDP. (Note: Kozulin's party briefly considered removing Frolov from the membership roster, but in the end decided against it.) Frolov's support group includes 1,152, the vast majority of which are also found on Voitovich's support group list. The two have announced their intention to run together. Igor Azarko will head Frolov's campaign.

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QBut That Was the Easy Part

13. (SBU) As early as October CEC Chairwoman Lydia Yermoshina and her deputy Nikolai Lozovik told Poloffs the candidate registration stage is merely a formality (ref B). Yermoshina explained that there are only three requirements to be eligible to run for president: 1) be a Belarusian citizen by birth; 2) be at least 35 years of age; and 3) have lived in Belarus for a consecutive period of nine years immediately prior to the elections. Yermoshina added that the members of the support groups of each candidate would also face little scrutiny, other than a cursory check of their identity and legal status.

14. (SBU) There was some uncertainty surrounding the registration of Poznyak because he failed to meet the third eligibility requirement, since he has been living in self-imposed exile in the United States and Poland for the past nine years. Lozovik told Pol/Econ Chief on December 23 that despite Poznyak's current whereabouts, the candidate possesses documents that establish his legal residency in Minsk and he holds property in Belarus. In a seven to five vote in the CEC, Poznyak was registered as a candidate. (Note: December 27 press reports indicate that police conducted a search of the residence of Poznyak's campaign manager because he allegedly was caught with a fake USD 100 note. The police have not provided further information.)

15. (SBU) Yermoshina has said repeatedly that the real criterion for appearing on the 2006 presidential ballot involves the collection of 100,000 signatures of voter support. According to Yermoshina, the 2001 presidential elections highlighted the degree of difficulty of collecting sufficient signatures. Of the approximately 20 candidates that the CEC initially registered in the previous presidential elections, only three collected enough "authentic" signatures. (Note: In the 2004 parliamentary elections, the CEC disqualified many potential candidates, alleging their signatures were fraudulent.)

Signature Collection Q Rules of the Game

16. (U) Beginning December 29, the eight potential candidates will have 30 days, or until January 27, to collect a minimum of 100,000 signatures. The CEC reserves the right to verify a sample (usually 20 percent) of the collected signatures. Below are some of the rules the potential candidates must obey while collecting signatures, according to Article 61 of the Electoral Code:

-- Only members of the support groups can collect signatures on behalf of the potential candidates.

-- Only Belarusian citizens who are at least 18 years of age and in good legal standing can give their signatures of support.

-- Voters can sign more than one candidate's signature list, but they are allowed only to sign the signature list of the same candidate only once.

-- Signature collectors can show voters various campaign brochures to persuade voters to give their signatures of support to a particular candidate, but voters are not allowed to keep the campaign materials. (Note: The CEC has officially warned Milinkevich of improperly distributing campaign information, establishing a potential legal basis for disqualifying the potential candidate.)

Comment

17. (C) The democratic potential candidates recognize the Central Electoral Committee has full authority to put an end to their presidential aspirations during the voter signature collection and verification stage. Two issues concern most democratic presidential hopefuls. First, many lack the name recognition and human and financial resources to collect the necessary signatures. Second, there were widespread and credible allegations that the CEC arbitrarily nullified signatures in previous parliamentary and presidential elections to prevent certain candidates from appearing on the ballot. Ten Plus coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and his campaign team have told us on several occasions that they aim to exceed the minimum amount of signatures to increase the likelihood a large number of voters would participate in street demonstrations to protest Milinkevich's possible

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disqualification. Post will report septel on the background and campaign platforms of each of the potential candidates.

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